

The Correct Use of Borrowed Information

(Updated August 2022)

To complete a writing assignment, you may find it necessary to gather information by interviewing people; by reading books, magazines, journals, or other printed materials; by downloading material off the Internet; or by viewing and/or listening to films, plays, or some other formal or informal presentations. Such borrowed information usually appears in your writing as **paraphrases, direct quotations, or summaries**. However, correctly incorporating borrowed material into your own writing requires special skill. Improper use of borrowed information creates chaos in your essay; it also results in plagiarism, which means presenting someone else's ideas or words as your own. To ensure that you do not unintentionally plagiarize, you should clearly “frame” all borrowed information—whether direct quotations, paraphrased, or summarized materials—by introducing, identifying, and evaluating the source and by citing the source at the end of the borrowed information.

Plagiarism

Intentional plagiarism is a form of cheating. However, many students find themselves unintentionally presenting someone else's work as their own simply because these students do not know how to use borrowed information correctly. For example, students often do not know how to paraphrase properly and simply mix their own words and phrases with those in the original source without enclosing borrowed elements in quotation marks. Below you will find a paragraph as it appeared in the original source, E. D. Hirsch's book *Cultural Literacy*:

The recently rediscovered insight that literacy is more than a skill is based upon knowledge that all of us unconsciously have about language. We know instinctively that to understand what somebody is saying, we must understand more than the surface meanings of words; we have to understand the context as well. The need for background information applies all the more to reading and writing. To grasp the words on a page we have to know a lot of information that isn't set down on the page. (3)

(Note that any direct quotation that is more than four lines of prose is indented one-half inch from the left margin, and double-spaced. See *Rules for Writers*, 10th edition, chapter 56b.)

Using this original paragraph, we will give you definitions and examples of a paraphrase, a direct quotation, and a summary. Remember, failure to paraphrase, quote, or summarize correctly can constitute plagiarism. (You can find more information about avoiding plagiarism in *Rules for Writers*, 10th edition, chapter 55.)

Definition of a Paraphrase

A paraphrase is a restatement in **your own words** and **your own style** of someone's ideas and discoveries. You must change both the words and the sentence structure of the original. Please remember that your purpose in using a paraphrase is not to save words because normally the paraphrase is about the same length as the original. Your purpose, instead, is to express the borrowed information in a style that is your own and that is already familiar to your reader. (See *Rules for Writers*, 10th edition, chapters 55 and 56a.)

Plagiarized Paraphrase

In his book *Cultural Literacy*, University of Virginia English professor and noted literacy theorist E. D. Hirsch argues that literacy is more than a skill. It is, instead, based upon what we know unconsciously about language. By instinct, we are aware that we must know more than the surface meaning of words; we must grasp the situation too. We also have to have this background information when we read and write. In other words, to understand the words on a page, we must know more than what is written on a page (3).

Note how the underlined words are lifted without change from the original paragraph. Several phrases were taken in their entirety and that elsewhere only minor changes were made.

Correct Paraphrase

E. D. Hirsch, University of Virginia Professor of English and noted literacy theorist, reaffirms in his book *Cultural Literacy* that literacy is something other than just a “skill.” Instead, it involves some things that we all know intuitively about the way words function. We realize that to decode what is said to us, we must know more than the dictionary definitions of the individual words; in fact, we must also understand the situation in which the communication takes place. In order to read or write, we must be even more aware of the surrounding circumstances. Consequently, we have to know things other than the words themselves (3). Obviously, we need to consider many issues when we process language.

Note the “framed” material, beginning with the source and ending with the citation.

Definition of a Direct Quotation

A direct quotation is an exact repeating of someone else's words. (See *Rules for Writers*, 10th edition, chapters 55c and 56b.)

Example of a Direct Quotation

In *Cultural Literacy*, E. D. Hirsch, University of Virginia English professor and noted literacy theorist, persuasively argues that true literacy encompasses more than just recognizing words. Hirsch reminds us that “to understand what somebody is saying, we must understand more than the surface meanings of words; we have to understand the context as well” (3).

Definition of a Summary

A summary is simply a brief but accurate statement in your own words of the main idea(s) of some borrowed information. Brevity is the summary's reason for being, but a summary must give all of the main idea, not just half of it. (See *Rules for Writers*, 10th edition, chapters 55d and 56a.)

Example of a Summary

E. D. Hirsch, University of Virginia English professor and noted literacy theorist, suggests in his book *Cultural Literacy* that a person must know more than the dictionary meanings of words to be truly literate; he or she must also understand significant information that precedes and surrounds the communication (3).

Work Cited

Hirsch, E. D., Jr. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Incorporating Borrowed Material

Incorporating borrowed material into your own writing is not simply a matter of avoiding plagiarism. You must also create smooth transitions between your own words and ideas and those borrowed from other sources. These transitions should introduce and identify your sources and should evaluate the borrowed material. (See *Rules for Writers*, 10th edition, Chapter 56.)

Frequently, inexperienced writers will simply drop a summary or a quotation into the middle of their own writing and rely on only a parenthetical citation to help the reader make sense of it. The following is an example of such a situation:

Unclear Incorporation

The 1980s and 1990s spawned a large number of books about the nature of communication. Some of these, like Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand*, are concerned with gender differences. Others, like Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words*, deal with class and ethnicity. We must also remember that different communication situations require different strategies no matter what the gender, class, or ethnicity of the participants may be. If people know each other, their conversations can be more cryptic and not always simplistic. However, if they are unacquainted and know nothing of each other's background, they have to explain a great deal to be understood (Hirsch 4).

While this citation gives credit to Hirsch for borrowed ideas and, consequently, does not constitute plagiarism, it nevertheless creates several difficulties for the reader. In the first place, the reader does not know where the borrowing from Hirsch begins. A second problem is that the reader knows practically nothing about Hirsch's identity or his credentials. Finally, the reader doesn't know whether the writer is agreeing with Hirsch or disagreeing.

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unacquainted and know nothing of each other's background, they have to explain a great deal to be understood (4).

Note Hirsch's credentials and position are noted as the writer integrates his ideas into the discussion.

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Points to Remember

One of the most difficult tasks facing the writer of documented papers is to distinguish clearly between his or her own voice and the voices of the various authorities whose words and ideas are being incorporated into the paper. In order to accomplish this goal, writers should make sure that they do the following:

Introduce sources by name

Your source should always be introduced by name in the text rather than just in the parenthetical citation. This procedure must be followed when introducing quotations, but it is even more important when introducing paraphrased or summarized material. With quotations, the reader knows when the writer has begun to borrow because all the material is set off by quotation marks or indentation. With paraphrased or summarized material, only an introductory citation of the source's name will show the reader where the borrowed material has begun. (See *Rules for Writers*, 10th edition, chapter 56.)

Introduce source's credentials

The first time a source is introduced by name, it is important for the writer to identify this person, preferably by establishing the source's credentials as an authority on the subject under discussion. Authors vary widely in their degree of expertise, and it is up to you to justify to the reader your inclusion of a particular source's opinions. After the source has been identified once, it is not necessary to cite the credentials of that same person in subsequent references.

Use clear signal phrases.

Your paper may cite opinions on both sides of an issue: some you will oppose; some you will endorse. If you are writing an argument, it is absolutely crucial for the reader to know in which category any of the borrowed material belongs. Often writers believe that their position is obvious, but readers do not always find it to be. One easy way to make the matter clear is to include an evaluative adverb or other signal phrase in your introduction to the borrowed material. For example, rather than saying, "Hirsch states," you might say, "Hirsch persuasively argues," or

“Hirsch unrealistically claims.” (For a list of frequently used signal phrases, see *Rules for Writers*, 10th edition, chapter 56c.)

Documentation

The purpose of documentation is to enable any reader to follow in your footsteps. It should, in other words, be possible to go to the original sources of your borrowed ideas, words, and summaries and read more about them. To assist your reader in locating the material, always include a parenthetical citation of the source at the end of the borrowed material. That documentation within the body of the paper will lead the reader back to the Works Cited page, which will contain the full particulars on the sources that you used.

Review

- **Always give credit** to your sources every time you use them in your papers.
- **Introduce borrowed information**--whether in a direct quotation, a summary, or a paraphrase—by referring to its source in your text.
- **Include the credentials of a source** the first time the source is introduced. Be sure to indicate why or how this source is an authority on the matter under discussion.
- **Use evaluative words and phrases** when developing an argument to make clear the degree to which you oppose or endorse the opinion you are citing.
- **Give proper credit for information quoted directly** by both (1) enclosing a short quotation in quotation marks or indenting a long quotation (more than 4 lines of prose text) and (2) using an acceptable form of documentation.
- **Be sure to document summaries and paraphrases even though you do not use quotation marks or special indentation with these.** You can find detailed information on how to incorporate borrowed information into your papers in *Rules for Writers*.
- **Include a citation (usually the page numbers) in parentheses at the end of the borrowed material.** You should also read the appropriate sections on documentation in *Rules for Writers* and understand that you are responsible for using borrowed material correctly in your writing. You should also be aware of the penalties for plagiarism as stated in the *Student Handbook*. Depending on the severity of the offense, penalties may vary from a grade reduction on the assignment to a failing grade in the course.

Student Pledge

I have read this discussion and understand that I am responsible for using borrowed material correctly in my writing. I am also aware of the penalties for plagiarism as stated in the *Student Handbook* and on my instructor's syllabus.

Student's Signature

Date